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Conservative group to begin TV ads in support of House GOP bill on prescription drugs for Medicare

By David Espo, Associated Press, 5/9/2002 02:45

WASHINGTON (AP) In an early start to the campaign-season television wars, a conservative group with ties to the pharmaceutical industry is launching a multimillion-dollar advertising campaign that supports House Republicans on the issue of prescription drugs for Medicare.

The advertising by United Seniors Association coincides with a GOP plan to bring legislation to House floor by month's end, part of a broader Republican effort to neutralize the Democrats' long-standing advantage on key issues of importance to senior citizens.

Charles Jarvis, the group's chairman, described the commercial campaign as a "seven-figure" project that would begin on Thursday or Friday.

Officials in the two major political parties, who have access to advertising information from their own sources, said they expected about \$3 million in television commercials would run over the next two weeks in more than a dozen cities. They range in size from Philadelphia, Houston and Phoenix to Fargo, N.D., and Paducah, Ky.

In an interview Wednesday, Jarvis said the final scripts for the commercials were not yet available. He said the ads would express support for the emerging GOP bill, saying, "We believe that the House bill is the best approach." The bill is designed to give senior citizens access to private insurance for prescription drug coverage.

United Seniors Association describes itself as the "most influential and effective conservative seniors organization in the country." Its Web site on Wednesday featured a photograph of House Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Ill., at a GOP rally last week on the Capitol steps, where he released principles for the prescription drug bill.

Several Republican officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, said they understood that the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA) had provided the funds for the commercials.

Jarvis disputed that, saying, "This is not a PhRMA (advertising) buy. It is a national grass-roots buy."

But his claim was swiftly undercut by Jackie Cottrell, a spokeswoman for the pharmaceutical trade association, who said the organization had recently given Jarvis' group an "unrestricted educational grant" of undisclosed size. Both groups, she said, place a prescription drug benefit atop their list of priorities.

Democrats attacked even before the commercials began airing. "The same people who brought America higher prescription drugs costs are writing the Republican bill and writing the TV ads. Americans just aren't going to buy it," said Jenny Backus, spokeswoman for the House Democratic campaign committee.

Both political parties are expected to air television commercials on the prescription drug issue as the fall elections draw closer, but neither is expected to do so for weeks or months. Senate Democrats hope to push a rival prescription drug plan through that chamber by August.

The commitment of \$3 million by an outside group is an unusually large advertising effort six months before an election, and Republican strategists said they welcomed the effort.

Prescription drug legislation is emerging as a key issue in the battle for control of the House this fall. Senior citizens customarily vote in disproportionately large numbers in midterm elections, and polling taken for both parties indicates that Democrats hold a double-digit lead on the issues of Social Security and prescription drugs for Medicare.

The Democrats must pick up seven seats to be assured of gaining House control. Republicans must gain one to throw the Senate into a 50-50 tie that would give them organizational control.

For their part, Republicans are hoping they can shrink or erase their deficit on the drug issue by passing legislation in the House, seeking to duplicate a maneuver they used two years ago.

"Republicans passing a prescription drug benefit would go a long way to leaving Democrats with very little on the table to try to use against us," a GOP polling firm, Public Opinion Strategies, recently advised lawmakers.

The emerging House Republican bill would include a full federal subsidy for the low-income elderly and a system of insurance for costs up to \$2,000 a year in drug expenses, as well as protection against catastrophic costs.

All but low-income senior citizens would have to pay the entire cost of prescriptions in excess of \$2,000 a year, until the catastrophic coverage kicked in at \$5,000. The insurance would cost an estimated \$37 monthly in premiums.

The measure also incorporates President Bush's plan for discount cards designed to give seniors their drugs at reduced prices.

On the Net:

United Seniors Association: <http://www.unitedseniors.org>